Embracing Our Professional Differences: The Interface of School Social Workers with Child Protective Services

Christine Linda Plackis, LCSW, Ph.D.
Adelphi University
Garden City, NY

Statement of the Research Problem

The purpose of the current qualitative study was to explore the experiences of school social workers in two counties on Long Island, functioning in their mandated reporter role, looking specifically at any stress reactions they incurred as a result of mandated reporting. "School personnel are in a unique position to intervene in the life of a child who has been maltreated" (VanBergeijk & Sarmiento, 2006 p.79). For this very reason, they are identified as mandated reporters of child abuse and maltreatment under the law along with medical and law enforcement professionals (Rosien & Helms, 1993).

Social work services in schools have existed since 1906 and are now present in schools across the United States and the world (School Social Work Association of America, 2003). Allen-Meares (2002a) identifies the school social worker as the staff responsible for interventions "aimed at a perceived cause of imbalance existing outside the school environment or within the school system, at the child, or at a combination of those" (p. 88). In addition to being reporter to Child Protective Services, the school social worker might target his/her interventions around increasing knowledge and understanding about the issue of child abuse/ maltreatment (Allen-Meares, 2002a).

While the school social worker enjoys a unique position in the life of a child, it is not without consequence.

> "Listening to children talk about the trauma, trying to work in a complicated, frustrating and often 'insensitive' system, feeling helpless when trying to heal these children – all can make the adults working with these children vulnerable to develop their own emotional and behavioral problems" (Perry, 2003 p. 2).

Figley (1995) defines trauma workers as any people who work directly with victims of trauma including mental health professionals, victim advocates and caseworkers, among others. School social workers are on the front lines of dealing with student trauma that includes child abuse/maltreatment (Plackis, 2002) on a daily basis, thus exposing them to the stressors of trauma work. It is well documented that millions of children each year suffer the trauma of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect and this trauma bears a hefty cost; the result is often serious and chronic emotional and behavioral manifestations on the part of the social worker that in settings of limited resources, such as schools, can be difficult to mitigate (Perry, 2003).

Research Background and Questions

The work of Allen-Meares (2002), VanBergeijk (2005, 2006), and Waldfogel (2008) provide a critical understanding of the intersection of the roles of school social worker and mandated reporter, illustrating the value, necessity, and potential risks at this juncture. To elaborate on the existing body of knowledge regarding the reporting of child abuse and maltreatment by school personnel to Child Protective Services (CPS), this study explored the experiences of school social workers in their role as mandated reporters working with abused/maltreated children. The experiences included what it was like to make a report, the response of CPS, and their overall reaction to the handling of the case.

The primary research questions and probes were as follows:

1. What was the school social worker's experience with a case reported to CPS? What were the circumstances? The CPS reaction? How did CPS handle the case?
2. What was the school social worker's reaction to the CPS response?
3. What role, if any, do influences of administrators – principal, assistant principal, dean, chairperson – play in the school social worker's experience of making the CPS report?
4. What role, if any do influences of colleagues – teachers, psychologist, school counselors – play in the school social worker's experience of making a CPS report?
5. What was the reaction of the child? The family?
6. What were the school social worker's general thoughts on the case? Were there any similarities with other cases?

The most integral resource for child abuse/maltreatment is Child Protective Services but this agency alone, according to researchers, is inadequate. Waldfogel (2000) observes that the system is "in crisis and in urgent need of reform," (p. 43) noting that children do not receive adequate protection. The school social worker in his/her mandated reporter role is left with no other resource to address the abuse/ maltreatment reported by the child but CPS, the very system often flawed in its approach to child welfare. This, coupled with hearing the child's story weaves a web of occupational hazard.

The need for research in the area of working with abused/ maltreated children is critical; in 2009 alone, more than 16,000 reports of suspected child abuse and maltreatment were registered from Long Island, with more than 4,500 of those reports "indicated" (New York State Office of Children and Family Services, 2011), and schools are on the front lines of helping them. The focus of this study was suggested by the work of VanBergeijk & Sarmiento (2005, 2006) in which evidence was found that teachers may be suffering the effects of secondary traumatization as a result of the process of CPS reporting. Of the twenty-eight school personnel interviewed in the San Ysidro Unified School District, only three were school social workers. Their findings suggested the value of the current study, which widened the lens to school social workers on Long Island.

In addition to the concerns regarding the effect of reporting on school personnel is the potential for under-reporting abuse/ maltreatment concerns. Understanding factors that contribute to under-reporting is essential and stress on the school social worker may contribute to this phenomenon. Engel (1998) identified reasons for under-reporting by school personnel that included lack of help from CPS; concern that CPS interventions were harmful; anger on the part of the family; and further endangerment of the child. There were no studies located by this researcher that focused on the experience of the school social worker in reporting child abuse/ maltreatment, yet the literature clearly identifies them as school personnel who may make the call to CPS (Crosson-Tower, 2002; Horton & Cruise, 2001 VanBergeijk & Sarmiento, 2005, 2006).

Methodology

The current study used a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods have been noted to be appropriate when little knowledge exists about the research topic (Padgett, 1998). No existing studies specifically looking at the school social worker experience in mandated reporting had been located as of this study, so a qualitative research design was pursued.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is much less concerned with the generalizability of the sample obtained. Hence, the findings of the current study did not

seek to be presented as generalizable to the school social worker population at large; rather, the purpose of the sample was to expand the knowledge base of mandated reporter experiences.

The construction of data by people was a critical point for the current study, because although it began with some ideas about secondary trauma for school social workers, it did not end in this arena. In fact, about half-way through the interviews, it was discovered that this was likely not happening to most participants and new ideas began to develop about the school social worker mandated reporter experience.

This research used grounded theory methods to study the mandated reporter's experience, the central idea behind which is the generation of a theory or proposition closely related to the phenomenon being studied. Strauss & Corbin (1998) discuss that generating grounded theory is a process of a developing theory that emerges from the data collected. The researcher does not begin with a preconceived notion about the research, but rather, begins with a general topic for study and allows the data to emerge on its own.

The current research meets the criteria for rigor by all qualitative research standards, as all the procedures are clearly documented. The interviews were recorded in audio format and fully transcribed by the researcher. Interviews were also conducted and coded by the primary investigator. Two other licensed social workers assisted in the establishment of coding procedures to insure credibility and reproducibility.

The study was conducted using a convenience sample of 15 school social workers in Nassau and Suffolk counties in New York State. School social workers were defined as social workers employed in host settings such as local school districts, regional school agencies, and special education agencies (SSWAA, 2003) providing direct service to students and families. Recruitment took place from the Nassau/ Suffolk membership roster of the New York State School Social Workers Association (NYSSSWA), for which the researcher was a board member.

If the respondent wished to participate, they were assured of confidentiality and an interview time and place were arranged at the convenience and comfort of the participant. The interview locations appeared to have no impact on the content of the interview. The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table One.

The use of the semi-structured interview was employed, as some specific information was sought from each participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). One to one interviewing was chosen over a group interview with the intention that participants would feel less inhibited to share their personal experiences and not experience any undue influence in reporting their experiences. The study made use of intensive interviewing

and the perspective of the interviews is interpretive constructionist in nature; the importance of the data collected is inherent in how the participants viewed their experiences and the meanings they attributed to them (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

"Researchers need alternative models appropriate to qualitative designs that ensure rigor without sacrificing the relevance of the qualitative research" (Krefting, 1999 p.174). To this end, four concepts widely accepted in qualitative research to validate the work – credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability – were addressed in this study (Krefting, 1999).

Results

A primary finding of this research involved the stress incurred by the school social workers evolving from their interactions with the CPS supervisors and caseworkers. Explained succinctly, the interface of the education and Child Protective Services systems occurs at the mandated reporter. These systems appear to be working in conflict and as such, there are stressors reported by school social workers in the mandated reporter role. School social workers were largely frustrated about their interactions with the Child Protective system. A lack of respect, lack of communication, and encounters with unprofessional caseworkers and supervisors served to compound the experience that despite their legal mandate to report, CPS was perceived as an ineffective system that has generally failed the children and families it is designed to serve.

This finding was particularly relevant for the purposes of illuminating professional differences. Child Protective Services interventions were made by caseworkers and supervisors, some of whom were organized into teams. Some research participants were completely disgusted with those who had responded to cases they called in. Their experiences were rife with unprofessionalism and a perceived lack of action on the part of the caseworkers. One participant reported an instance of a caseworker making ethnic slurs regarding a Hispanic family upon her first contact with them at school. In another case, the participant and the child believed that the assigned caseworker actually knew the father who was the subject of the allegations yet continued to work on the case. The position of CPS supervisor was not highly regarded by one participant, who shared her impressions of how supervisors are appointed and what the agency and appointments represent – political positions in a system designed only to put the county in a favorable light.

Part of the stress of interacting with CPS seemed to be attributed to the apparent lack of information sharing that occurs on the part of caseworkers with the schools. Participants spoke repeatedly about understanding confidentiality, but not understanding why it is okay for them to report but are not privy to the follow up investigation and care

of the child and family. They stated that confidentiality laws apply to all social workers and expressed their lack of understanding about why CPS does not recognize that school social workers will abide by confidentiality. School social workers discussed stressors related to a lack of respect they experienced from CPS towards them, including questioning of their professional assessments, differing practices among CPS across the state, and having their identities revealed to families. Another participant went so far as to say that this kind of behavior by CPS is a "new trend" as she angrily spoke about what has happened to her and colleagues. Another that had earlier shared her frustration about being revealed went on to speak of how complaints in this regard go largely unaddressed. An interesting theme that arose in participant interviews was the idea that only tragedy motivates the system out of the doldrums of its daily routines. School social workers experienced a sense of complacency that was quickly reversed when children perished at the hands of families who were under investigation by CPS. One situation like this occurred in one of the counties just before the researcher had begun interviews for this study. Participants spoke of how this created additional stress and frustration for them. School social workers seemed to feel that credible evidence was found that children were being abused or maltreated and in their estimation, nothing was being done about it – thus leaving them to feel that CPS is ineffective. Finally, there was also a general sense that the system has failed. In fact, more than one participant used those exact words to describe what they have experienced as a total breakdown of an agency that is designed to protect children and help families recover. One participant spoke about her consternation regarding CPS' refusal to take a case of a kindergartner missing from school for more than two weeks. The perceived system failure left school social workers with a feeling of powerlessness to help students and families, thus constituting a great deal of stress in the mandated reporter role.

Utility for Social Work Practice

In understanding and learning from the conflict under which education and CPS are operating, the concept of *power* in organizational conflicts is relevant. "Power is the medium through which conflicts of interest are ultimately resolved. Power influences who gets what, when, and how" (Morgan 2006, p. 166). It can be viewed as a resource or a kind of social relation – an influence over something or someone. Both definitions may apply to the findings of this research. School social workers appear to believe that Child Protective Services possesses power to stop child abuse/ maltreatment; they also believe that they have the power to compel families to comply with directives to accomplish that goal. In fact, discussion further along reveals that this is not necessarily the case. Caseworkers may direct the family to comply with mandates such as family counseling or other kinds of treatment, as well as to stop the abuse of children. However, if the

family fails to comply, CPS must then decide to take further action that may require the approval of a judge, for example, a removal. If judges do not agree, the recommended interventions do not occur; however, it is CPS who is then perceived as ineffective by mandated reporters. The expectation of power for CPS then holds significance in the perception of effectiveness and case outcomes, creating conflict in how education and CPS work together. For example, school social workers took issue with removal as an intervention, feeling that it was not always done or successful when it was. Nassau County CPS Director Maureen McLoughlin (2008) candidly shared the frustration that CPS personnel experience when they attempt removals. She reported that this must be done with the approval of Family Court judges, all of whom are elected officials and do not necessarily have training in the kinds of issues that they must adjudicate. In many cases, CPS does a thorough investigation and prepares all the necessary paperwork, only to have a judge return children to unsafe situations because a mother comes to court and cries; this leaves CPS personnel as frustrated as the school social workers report. In fact, the literature supports McLoughlin's position:

> "The decisions regarding the health and welfare of these children is often out of the hands of the clinical team. And when hours of clinical work seem to be ignored by a judge… the sense of hopelessness can eat away at effectiveness and motivation" (Perry 2003, p. 5).

Also consistent with the work of Morgan (2006) – who states that organizational conflict involves personality issues – the findings of this research indicate that school social workers experience difficulties related to the training and behavior of CPS staff and the general attitude from CPS towards school staff. School social workers experienced a lack of respect that manifested in the questioning of their judgment and assessments related to the children and families, as well as revealing their identities as the source of the reports despite confidentiality laws that protect them.

With regard to the stressors created by perceived unprofessionalism among caseworkers, some of the school social workers commented that there seemed to be a lack of training and that in fact, is a suggestion for improvement. This finding is corroborated by a Child Protective Services director, who in a workshop reported that individuals become caseworkers by taking a civil service examination, subsequent to which CPS administration must choose these individuals from a list based upon their scores. Training is less than six months and consists mainly of theory and issues in the field; after five months, a new caseworker is given their own case (McLoughlin, 2008). The findings of this study suggest that six months of training may not be enough; there appears to be a lack of thorough training regarding interviewing children and families, as well as interacting with mandated reporting professionals. This gap leaves the door open for unprofessional behavior as well as a lack of respect for school professionals, because

it is unclear what knowledge the caseworker might have about these two factors in conducting an investigation.

A primary purpose of the grounded theory approach in this research was to suggest contributions to theory, which may be substantiated by other researchers or found to be anomalies of the participants in this study. The essence of the theory suggested here is that in the presence of multiple risk factors for the development of secondary trauma, the stressors that define the mandated reporter experience do not define the school social worker. As such, the theory that emerges from the research about the absence of secondary trauma is suggestive of further study of mandated reporter experiences in other areas where socio-contextual factors exist as well as the role of coping strategies as protective factors.

A general systems theory perspective was applied in this research to provide a framework for understanding the meanings elicited from study participants regarding their mandated reporter experiences. The conflict between the systems seems to reflect somewhat of a lack of understanding between them about the roles, responsibilities, regulations and protocols of each.

Bowen (2002) reminds us that, "A major assumption of general systems theory is that all systems are purposeful and goal-directed" (p. 55). But what happens when two systems with different stated goals must work together for a common goal? In this case, the stated goal of the education system is to promote learning and education; the mission of Child Protective Services is to protect children. These two systems interface at the mandated reporter, who has regular exposure to children and access to those who can protect them outside of the school environment. This current study has illustrated the outcome when social systems do not work in concert. It also leaves the proverbial door open for the possibility that there is a hidden agenda for Child Protective Services. At least for the participants in this study, mandated reporting is being complied with. However, the perceived response to it is troubling for the mandated reporters. The findings revealed two responses in support of a covert agenda for CPS; one participant spoke of CPS as a "political assignment," one that appeared to have little to do with ability of the individuals working there or the mission of protecting children. This is somewhat supported by the selection of CPS workers from a civil service examination list rather than from a grouping of people who are qualified in their educational background and skill levels.

In general, the findings present a challenge to the ideals of social organization, defined as,

> "…A dimension of social systems that refers to networks of relationships among people, their patterns of exchange and levels of reciprocity, and the degree to

> which they provide instrumental and expressive support to one another in achieving their individual and collective goals" (Bowen 2002, p. 58).

While the social systems of education and CPS are unmistakably intertwined, they do not achieve effective patterns of exchange or levels of reciprocity in the current study. While the overt goals of education and CPS are notably different, collectively, they seek to serve the best interests of children. When personnel from two systems are unable to provide support for each other – including reciprocity – neither system can achieve the collective goal.

There were some identified systemic coping mechanisms available to school social workers while interfacing with CPS. One such mechanism was building relationships between the education system and CPS. It is not surprising that this factor emerged as helpful in mandated reporting, as the literature suggests that,

"If social work decisions and interventions have a fit with the problem behavior and with the organizational structure of the client's system then they work more effectively" (Bilson & Ross 1999, p. 87).

Relationship building with CPS, particularly in the form of inviting CPS to address and educate school personnel about their protocols and procedures helped to improve interactions between the practice areas. This approach made for a better "fit" in that social work inherently uses outreach to outside systems to build connections in order to solve problems. It is not surprising that the school social workers had a better experience following connection with CPS.

> "Nassau County officials, citing a social services system crippled by a lack of communication between agencies, Tuesday suspended a supervisor who failed to follow up on the Leatrice Brewer case and ordered a review of all 1,000 open child abuse and neglect cases. County Executive Thomas Suozzi and other officials Tuesday gave their first detailed explanation of the county's response to a complaint on Friday that Brewer, 27, of New Cassel, was a danger to her three children. The children were found dead in the family's apartment Sunday morning" (Epstein, 2008).

And there it is; a lack of communication between CPS and other agencies with deadly consequences. This was just one of the frustrations school social workers reported in their mandated reporter roles. They were clear – they understood confidentiality and they just wanted to make sure their students were alright and being served – and protected.

Waldfogel (2008) discusses that the traditional method of CPS investigation has involved a "…narrowly prescribed response to reports of abuse or neglect, and reports that are screened in must be investigated in a way that satisfies strict rules and regulations

that specify who must be seen and in what time frame" (p. 236). School social workers are experiencing those "strict rules" as a "no talking" policy whereby they make reports to the register, speak briefly with a county caseworker to verify the report, and then never hear anything further about the investigation until a letter comes with the findings. Somehow, this makes little sense, particularly in light of the excerpt above. In this regard, the implication for Child Protective Services from this study is consistent with the recommendations of Waldfogel (2008), who suggests a "differential response" to CPS investigations. This entails: 1. A more customized approach to families; 2. The development of a more community-based system of child protection; and 3. Greater involvement on the part of informal and natural helpers (p. 236). Inherent in these principles is seemingly, more communication – more communication that will allow for school social workers to be part of the intervention process and that may serve to alleviate frustrations and some of the stress associated with the mandated reporter role. It may also improve the perception of effectiveness of Child Protective Services.

Despite frustrations they experienced, the school social workers did, for the most part, acknowledge the phenomenon of "underpaid and overworked" on the part of CPS caseworkers. Again, tragedies in families support this:

> "Because of a shortage of caseworkers and increasing abuse reports since the death of Nixzmary Brown in New York City, about 28 percent of investigations in Suffolk have gone beyond the 60-day deadline for a finding, while nearly 20 percent of investigations in Nassau are overdue, child welfare officials said. Additionally, some Family Court judges are getting letters warning them about potential child abuse, while many are working longer hours to hear more cases" (Terrazano, 2006).

The implication regarding proper levels of staffing comes down to a case of simple logic; with thousands of reports of child abuse/ maltreatment each year, less workers will not be able to do the job efficiently.

The current study suggests that change is needed in how education and Child Protective Services function together. As Bilson & Ross (1999) point out, systems ideas can offer context for how change occurs and this is critical to the development of an approach that respects the needs and interactions of individuals, families, and communities with whom social work is concerned. Further research on systems in conflict may help contribute to what interventions might specifically remedy the problem. For although it is evident that social organization is necessary for mandated reporters to overcome some frustrations in their experience, Bilson & Ross (1999) caution,

> "Likewise, there is the well-recognized phenomenon in organizations whereby seemingly constant restructuring and reorganization are taking place but where the people working for that organization remain as discontented, confused, uninvolved, dissatisfied and unaffected by the process of change as they always

> were. This is humorously referred to in management literature as the 'rearranging-the-deckchairs-on-the-Titanic' phenomenon. The 'metarules' for systems change or second order change are that change occurs when the system has to adapt and when the rules governing the system are changed" (pp. 43-44).

In conclusion, true to the sentiments of Ann Hartman (1994), the findings of this study suggest that the social workers in both systems, "who continue to serve with integrity… are constantly frustrated by forces that undermine their efforts at every turn" (p. 155). The current findings support the ideal that embracing differences is not just about the clients we serve; it is about recognizing and acknowledging diversity within our own profession while at the same time, realizing that the things that make us different are the very same things that in fact, unite us. The solution to the perceived disrespect is to look past what we see on the surface – as we do with our clients, whether they be abused children or allegedly abusive adults – and acknowledge that although the systems we work within may in fact, function differently, our goal is the same – the protection of innocent children and the support of families in crisis. It is only when we, professional social workers, acknowledge and embrace the differences in the physical settings and modalities of our practice that we may elevate the social work profession to its highest levels of unity in achieving the goal.

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TABLE ONE

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT DATA

Initials	Gender	Status	Age	Ethnicity	Religon	Degree	CSSW	Years Exp.	Setting	Socio Econo	Stud. Pop.	# Refer. to CPS	Trauma Trng.	Yr. of Course	Addl. Trng.	Pers. Hist.
MH	F	single	34	white	catholic	MSW	yes	8	pub/ ele.	middle	1200	10	yes	1998	no	no
NK	F	divorced	54	white	protest.	MSW	yes	16	pub/mid.	middle	760	5 to 8	yes	1994	no	yes
JH	F	divorced	50	white	jewish	MSW	yes	22	pub/ele.	middle	1800	10 to 12	yes	2006	yes	no
AG	F	married	39	white	none	MSW	yes	4	pub/high	lower	800	20	yes	2004	yes	no
JBH	F	married	41	white	jewish	MSW	yes	5	pub/ele.	middle	700	5	yes	2003	no	no
FK	F	married	47	white	jewish	MSW	yes	10	pub/ele.	lo/mid	700	15 to 20	no	2003	no	no
KA	F	single	32	white	catholic	MSW	yes	3	pub/high	mixed	1100	10	yes	2001	yes	no
AZ	F	divorced	42	hispanic	catholic	MSW	yes	10	pub/high	middle	1600	20	no	1994	yes	yes
ER	F	married	48	white	catholic	MSW	yes	18	pub/high	lower	800	5 to 10	no	1990	yes	no
NS	F	married	42	white	catholic	MSW	yes	16	pub/mid.	mixed	1100	10 to 20	yes	1995	yes	no
MM	F	married	59	white	catholic	MSW	yes	30	pub/ele.	mixed	365	2	yes	1964	no	no
MF	F	married	51	hispanic	catholic	MSW	yes	16	pub/ele.	lower	650	10	yes	1995	no	no
MG	M	married	51	white	E Orthodox	MSW	yes	12	pub/m/el	upper	1200	10	yes	1996	no	no
PZ	M	married	59	white	none	MSW	yes	25	pub/mid.	middle	925	2	yes	2005	no	no
SF	F	married	59	white	jewish	MSW	yes	30	pub/adm.	middle	1000	5	yes	1978	yes	no